

## The Marikana Strike: The Origins of a Living Wage Demand and Changing Forms of Worker Struggles in Lonmin Platinum Mine, South Africa

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### Abstract

*On 16 August 2012, 34 mineworkers were gunned down by police during strike action in Marikana, South Africa, where Lonmin, the third largest platinum mining company in the world, is located. This has been termed the Marikana massacre, described as a turning point in South African history. Drawing from original ethnographic research, the article highlights the origins of the now infamous living wage demand of R12,500 South African (or about USD\$500) per month which was more than twice the average worker's salary at the time. Its origins, which can be traced back to two specific workers, did not involve violence or inter-union rivalry, nor were its initiators militant or uncompromising as has been suggested elsewhere. The article argues that the idea of violent solidarity and the assertion that workers were motivated by inter-union rivalry, obscure the independent nature of workers' resistance and the way in which it was transformed over time. The empirical evidence presented below also indicates that, on the evening which followed the massacre, workers held a small meeting and took a resolution that they would continue the strike in order that their slain colleagues would not have died in vain.*

### Introduction

"They Died for a Living Wage: The Struggle Continues" is a motto which remains at the time of writing inscribed on mineworkers' T-shirts throughout the Rustenburg Platinum Belt in the Northwest Province of South Africa. The country holds more than 80 per cent of the world's platinum underground. The T-shirts are coloured with dripping red ink, and include the wage demand of "R12,500" (about USD\$500 per month). The demand of R12,500 was more than twice the average mineworkers' salary when Lonmin workers in the town of Marikana first went on strike on 9 August 2012. The red ink represents the blood of the 34 mineworkers gunned down by the police on 16 August 2012 in what has become known as the Marikana massacre. Across the country, the demand for a living wage of R12,500 became a rallying cry for the unemployed and employed alike. In 2014, mineworkers from the three largest platinum mines in the world (Amplats, Impala and Lonmin) united around the demand during a five-month long strike, the longest in South African mining history.

In the South African media, the striking mineworkers of Lonmin have been consistently shown licking spears and sharpening metal rods. From initial television footage, shown throughout the country, it appeared that mineworkers were charging the police prior to the moment when the 34 workers were killed. But this narrative has been vehemently contested, and it is notable that no police were injured or killed on the day of the massacre (See Alexander). The story of platinum mineworkers' forms of organization and resistance during the period between 2012 and 2014 has been dominated by theories and images of strike violence. The idea of violent "solidarity" has been adopted to describe the way in which mineworkers united by using violent methods (Chinguno, 2013). Chinguno concludes "the violence at Marikana underpinned rather than undermined collective solidarity" (Chinguno, 2013: 645), thus suggesting that violence was the key feature of workers' resistance during the period under investigation.

Nowhere has the discourse of violence been more insidious than in the Marikana Commission of Inquiry's final report, commissioned by President Jacob Zuma, released in late June 2015, after sitting for 300 days. The commission was intended to explain what

caused the events leading up to the Marikana massacre and the massacre itself. The final report vilified the striking mineworkers to the extent that they were essentially *blamed for killing themselves* (Farlam et al: 43). The report suggests that the commission was incapable of understanding the events from the mineworkers' perspective. Its findings and recommendations are based on the assumption that strikers were violent, and that this led to the deaths of 34 workers on the day of the massacre. This contributes to a static picture of blood thirsty savages, intent on meting out extreme forms of violence against strike breakers or even the police.

Conventional approaches also suggest that inter-union rivalry and the involvement of a seemingly militant upstart union, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), played a role in instigating action at Lonmin (see Botiveau). In contrast, this article demonstrates the opposite happened: workers put aside their union affiliations in order to collectively demand higher wages. Drawing primarily from original ethnographic research, I suggest the idea of violent solidarity (Chinguno, 2013) and the assertion that workers were motivated by inter-union rivalry (Botiveau), obscure both the independent nature of worker resistance and the way it transformed over time. Ethnography involves the "in-depth study of the culture of a people, group, or community" (Robben and Sluka: 4). It seeks to understand, from the people's own perspective, what they do and the meanings they associate with their actions. Furthermore, studying a group over an extended period of time allows one to see that the poor, or the working class is not a "fixed, virtuous subject"—a view common within the South African "left" (Walsh: 256) —but rather one that evolves over time as individuals seek to collectively address their interests in the context of changing structural circumstances.

Scholarly contributions explaining the events surrounding the Marikana massacre have offered essential insights into the structural conditions that prompted strike action in the South African platinum mines (Hartford).<sup>ii</sup> In addition, Alexander et al's *Marikana: A View from the Mountain and a Case to Answer*, which I co-authored with others, offered detailed and insider worker testimonies of the Marikana massacre itself. The book quickly established the basic facts from the workers' perspective, and these facts have stood up over time as being quite accurate. Yet few studies focused on the Lonmin mineworkers' resistance have been based on extensive empirical evidence collected in a few months of research, let alone multiple years of ethnographic research.<sup>iii</sup>

Drawing from a study undertaken over a period of 24 months between 2012 and 2014, this article reveals the thus far hidden processes through which seemingly ordinary workers became extraordinary historical figures. The research included interviews with more than 60 respondents, as well as participant observation carried out by myself and a number of research assistants, including Siphiwe Mbatha and Thapelo Lekgowa. Interviews were conducted between mid-2012 and mid-2014, both while mineworkers were on strike and when they were not. Rather than name individuals as anonymous, I have provided pseudonyms for each of the workers interviewed. Passages from the interviews, including direct quotes from key leaders, are presented in the article in order to focus on the indispensable role of a few specific individuals in this historically significant collective mobilization.

The description below reveals the processes through which Lonmin workers first conceptualized the salary of R12,500. As we shall see, R12,500 was not initially a demand *per se*. The workers' initial intention was not to engage in strike action, but simply to request higher salaries from management. The sections which follow highlight the ways in which workers became increasingly determined in their struggle for a living wage. The efforts evolved to a spiritual dimension, literally becoming a matter of life and death as workers became "spiritually resolved" in their struggle.

Each section below examines the changing forms of organization in the platinum belt between 2012 and 2014, both before and after the Marikana massacre. Workers employed various strategies: forming a workers' committee independent of any union in May 2012 to engage management directly; arming themselves in self-defense, and waiting on a mountain for their employer to address them on 11 August 2012; continuing to strike following the massacre of their colleagues on 16 August; and later joining AMCU. These were all logical steps in forging, and then maintaining power. Every step involved increasingly greater masses of workers to attempt direct and non-violent negotiations with the mine owners and managers. Each of the different forms of organization represented attempts to unite the workforce and/or to persuade fellow workers of their cause. These decisions did not involve, in the first instance, meting out violence against non-strikers, nor were strikers in the initial stages motivated primarily by their union affiliation.

### **Conceptualizing the Demand for R12,500**

In January 2012 Impala platinum mine witnessed the beginning of a major unprotected strike wave. The term "unprotected" is used to describe a strike whereby workers' jobs are not "protected" by the Labour Relations Act (LRA). Rock Drill Operators (RDOs), a specific category of underground workers, are amongst the lowest paid, initiated strike action at Impala (and, as we shall see, at Lonmin). Later that month, the unrest had spread beyond the confines of RDOs and virtually the entire workforce at Impala had downed tools. They won a major increase to R9,000 and the strike ended on 3 March 2012. At Impala, discontent with the then dominant union, National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), had come to a head because it had opposed the popular unprotected strike.

This set in motion a process whereby the NUM, once the largest union in the country with over 300,000 members, would be abandoned by workers independently and, at least in Rustenburg, largely dethroned. By the end of the strike, management had fired 18,000 of the striking mineworkers, which ended their union membership. About 11,000 others had resigned as NUM members at Impala by 30 March 2012. Perceived shortcomings of the union at each of the three major platinum mining houses (Amplats, Impala and Lonmin), especially its failure to defend workers subject to dismissal for engaging in unprotected strikes, set the stage for informal worker committees taking hold, first at Impala, and then at Lonmin and Amplats (see Sinwell 2015; Sinwell 2016).

Neither the conceptualization of the demand for R12,500 nor the emergence of the first worker committee at Lonmin, involved any significant degree of militancy or violence.<sup>iv</sup> This first period, between May to early August 2012, is better characterized simply by workers' attempt to have their salaries adjusted. There are three major shafts at Lonmin: Eastern, Western and Karee. The strike was initiated by a small group of RDOs at Karee who decided to put aside their union affiliation and form an independent, ad hoc committee. It began in May 2012, when one RDO at Karee, who was on leave at the time, considered the prospects of obtaining R12,500. He persuaded another worker (affiliated with a different union) and then several more, until more than one hundred workers supported the demand and it became a collective effort.

First, some brief background: In May 2011, a prominent NUM shop steward nicknamed "Steve", whom workers at all three Lonmin mine shafts viewed as a genuine leader, was fired by the NUM for violating their constitution. Soon thereafter, virtually the entire Karee workforce went on an unprotected strike in defense of Steve, and management dismissed about 9,000 workers. This led to management selectively re-hiring most workers, but about 1,400 were not rehired. Lonmin representatives went in search of new workers, especially RDOs, to fill the gap in their workforce. From the workers' perspective, they had been fired by the NUM, which was viewed as siding with management and undermining their

interests. In that context, AMCU began to recruit at Karee. By the time of the 9 August 2012 strike, NUM had barely 20 per cent membership at Karee, while AMCU had over 50 per cent. When combined with the other two Lonmin mines, Eastern and Western, however, the NUM represented the majority with 58 per cent of the total workforce (Da Costa: 149). This was to change drastically in the months to follow, as NUM membership declined significantly. The division between AMCU and NUM at the mine was to have important implications for the forms of organization that would later emerge.

One of the open positions at Karee was soon filled by a man named Molapo, who had previously worked at both Amplats and Impala. Between 2006 and 2009, while working at Amplats, Molapo was a shop steward and then branch deputy secretary of the Mouthpeace Workers' Union, which had vied with the NUM for union recognition during the mid to late 1990s. He learned a great deal as a shop steward, both about leading workers, and about the channels through which they could press for changes outside of established bargaining structures. Around 2010 he became an RDO at Impala, but, he explains, he "didn't last long because . . . the money it was so little" (Interview, Molapo). This was, of course, prior to the 2012 strike at Impala.

In mid-2011 Molapo arrived in Karee and joined the NUM, which was the dominant union at Lonmin overall. By contrast, at Karee mine specifically, NUM was a minority, while AMCU was the majority. He spent less than a year working at Lonmin before he concluded, in 2012, that workers deserved more money for the tough work they were undertaking. Molapo had come from Impala, where RDOs were now making comparatively more money than they did at Lonmin, due to the Impala strike earlier in the year.

Although at Karee the drilling machine was lighter than those at Eastern and Western and designed for single operators,<sup>v</sup> he was nevertheless disappointed that in Karee, unlike in the other two major Lonmin shafts, RDOs had no assistants to carry the cumbersome machine. While Molapo, a worker, was on leave in early 2012, he observed:

I found the money at Lonmin, it's small. As the money is so small, it was clear that Lonmin doesn't have the truth. It was apartheid. They don't treat people equally. And they are doing the same job. Those that they [management] liked, they gave them assistants. And there are those that they... don't give assistants. That's the thing that hurt my heart the most, when I look at my salary. The money, it's small . . . after deduction, it comes to R4000, R3900. That's the thing that triggers me. And then I end up calling the guys and say, 'Hey...let's approach the management about this money' (Molapo, 28 September 2013).

Molapo met a man named Mbulelo and they had a discussion in the change rooms after completing a tough day's work underground in late May 2012. They had both been working at Lonmin for less than a year, but that day they began a process of uniting workers—one that has gone down in history. They discussed a basic salary which they believed would adequately compensate them for their work: R12,500. Molapo explains:

We sat down, me and [Mbulelo] two of us. And then we said, because we see that we are earning 4,500, some 4,900, [we thought our salary should be] 5000 plus [an additional] 5000.... We took the wages we are earning, we multiply it times two. And then we saw that if we can take the salary that we are getting and multiply it twice, that this will be an amount of money that can satisfy us... according to the work we are doing... That's why when I spoke to the

workers I said, '12,500 is the money that can satisfy us' (Molapo, 28 September 2013).

He noted further that the additional R2,500 (on top of the 10,000 which was approximately twice the salary of an RDO) would come from management's "sympathy" for the workers: "he can put some other cents that come from him [and] when it combines with this R10,000, it will be like R12,500" (worker, Molapo, 28 September 2013).

Molapo recalls, "I started to talk with other guys here about going to approach management because we work hard". He told the workers, "We don't have to meet these union guys because we will confuse ourselves. Because there are two [unions], we don't know which will agree and which will disagree. It's our right to approach management if things are not going well" (Molapo, 19 September 2014). NUM became increasingly unpopular at Karee and over time AMCU developed a stronghold. While Mbulelo joined AMCU, believing that the upstart union held promise, Molapo, however, decided to join the NUM—believing that, as a new employee, it was beneficial to be part of the dominant union at Lonmin:

When I arrived, I was part of those people to try to build NUM in Karee in [the second half of] 2011. But in 2012, I saw that the NUM does not get the membership in Karee. It's where I thought about this. I found that AMCU has got the majority in Karee and NUM does not have the majority but I was a member of it (Molapo, 19 September 2014).

During that initial conversation in late May 2012, when the two RDOs had met in the change rooms, Molapo recalled, "We reached a point where we talked about combining workers" (worker, Molapo, 28 September 2013). Molapo and Mbulelo agreed, "Even if it can be like five RDOs, it will be fine. Five to ten people and discuss about this issue" (worker, Molapo, 28 September 2013). From the outset, they had no intention of striking and their main concern was that management take note of the hard work that they were doing underground as RDOs with no assistants.

They called a meeting with other Karee RDOs. They mobilized by word of mouth and at the first meeting there were indeed the five or ten people that Molapo and Mbulelo had hoped for. They discussed the fact that, at Karee, RDOs were paid the same amount as other workers in Eastern and Western, but they were not given an assistant. Molapo explained that, "Karee was worse. They make it exceptional by not giving it assistants. Karee was working very hard . . . That's why I end up doing what we are doing, because they [management] do it on purpose." (Molapo, 28 September 2013).

Many of the RDOs were hesitant to join, perhaps believing that nothing would come of it. Others feared they would be fired as strikers had been the previous year at Karee. Based on his conversations with the rank and file, Molapo explained: "The previous year people were fired and they were confused about what I was doing because they thought that when this strike starts again it will happen again." He told them "it would not repeat again" (worker, Molapo, 19 September 2014).

Pamphlets were made to mobilize RDOs for the second meeting, which was held around early June 2012. About 45 to 50 RDOs attended and the question of a R12,500 basic salary was the main issue of concern. Michael Da Costa, who took the Senior Manager post at Karee shafts in 2009, recollected that he had seen an A4 sheet of paper posted up by workers who were preparing for what would be the third meeting of RDOs on 21 June (Da

Costa, 2012: 67). He further confirmed that there was “no indication thereon of any trade union involvement,” and that other staff with whom he worked had also seen these posters, but that previous meetings had been fairly small (Da Costa, 2012: 68).

Da Costa was concerned that he might have to deal directly with the issue. He noted that following the 2011 strike at Karee, “Lonmin implemented a ‘Line of Sight’ strategy in terms of which management would, where possible, communicate directly with employees to improve the effectiveness of direct management communication and to identify problems and issues quickly and to resolve them at the lowest possible level.” (Da Costa, 2012: 77) The manager also knew that RDOs at Amplats and Impala were being paid more than they were at Lonmin—making it a potential hotspot for grievances. The fact that RDOs at Impala had sought to engage management directly earlier in the year, and RDOs at Amplats were in talks with management regarding salary increases, was also on his mind (Da Costa, 2012: 68).

### **RDOs Become More Assertive: Management Considers Demand of 12,500**

Molapo recalled that at the third informal meeting of RDOs, which took place at Karee hostel on 21 June, the consciousness of the workers began to shift. At the time, he could not have realized the significance his seemingly minor organizing tactics would later have, not only for Lonmin as a whole, but for South Africa as a country. He was the spark underground which would eventually ignite the entire workforce at Lonmin. More than 100 RDOs were present and the mood no longer signaled quiescence. The RDOs at Lonmin, and at Karee mine in particular, had been undertaking strenuous labour—some for merely months, and others for decades. Given that they were part of different unions at Karee, they realized that approaching their unions would divide them. They therefore bypassed their union and decided to put their request for R12,500 directly to management. This period did not involve any degree of violence, but rather involved RDOs becoming more assertive. It also reflected a situation in which management, at this early stage, willingly negotiated.

During this meeting, the workers decided to march with their grievances to management. According to Da Costa, the march took place at 5 p.m. on 21 June, and 300 RDOs were present (Da Costa, 2012: 69). Security, however, did not allow them to enter the premises. Da Costa noted that security had informed him “the crowd requested me to meet them outside of my office and to address them directly”. He did not agree. Instead, he sent “a message to the crowd, informing that I would not address a large crowd on such short notice” (Da Costa, 2012: 69). Da Costa then asked them to put their issues in writing so that they could be responded to in due time. Security, however, told him that the workers were claiming to be illiterate and were therefore requesting to see him in person.

The two RDOs were, according to Mbulelo, then “elected . . . at the gate to go and talk to the management” (worker, Mbulelo, 15 August 2013). The meeting therefore involved one NUM member (Molapo), one AMCU member (Mbulelo), and Da Costa. Da Costa himself recalled the RDO representatives had indicated to him that they did not want to involve union structures in the deliberations, since their grievance was a matter for RDOs only. Da Costa described the meeting as one that was respectful, not aggressive, and non-confrontational. Nevertheless, when Molapo requested the R12,500 basic salary for all RDOs at Karee mine, Da Costa was flabbergasted since this amounted to a wage increase of 150 per cent (Da Costa, 2012: 71-72). At this stage, the RDOs and their committee were not uncompromising. When Molapo put the cards on the table, he already understood that Da Costa would indicate that he was unable to meet the demand completely: “We were not even looking for him to give us this 12,500, but we were trying to talk to him, just to raise our [salaries] . . . Maybe if it was to be at least 8,000, but we demanded 12,500” (worker, Molapo, 19 September 2014).

Da Costa insisted that such an increase would need to go through proper channels and would have to be dealt with during wage negotiations. He recalled the two RDOs stating “that amount [of R12,500] seemed like a good and reasonable amount” (Da Costa, 2012: 72). Molapo took care during the meeting to insist this was “not a strike, but a memorandum of requests,” that the intention was “not to have a negative impact on production,” and that this was why they were approaching the management directly. Moreover, he said that he understood that “wage negotiations are for everyone and [that] this is specific for RDOs due to hard labour” (Workers’ Secretary Notes). Da Costa stated he needed to consult with Lonmin management, “as the demand is unreasonable,” particularly given the “tough economic conditions” and that other mines were closing as a result (Da Costa, 2012: 72). The meeting lasted for about an hour and the two RDO representatives were told to come back in two weeks to find the way forward regarding the issue (Workers’ Secretary Notes). The two RDOs left the room and joined the workers, who then dispersed.

Prior to the second meeting with management, the workers decided to elect a top five to speak for them. They chose Molapo, Mbulelo and three other RDOs. The five of them visited Da Costa on 2 July to further pursue the negotiations. Da Costa informed the five RDOs he “could not give them any final answer on the issue since the Exco [Lonmin Executive Committee] was still dealing with their demand” (Da Costa, 2012: 74). In his opinion the meeting “remained relatively cordial,” but “the RDO representatives were becoming increasingly more assertive on the issue” (Da Costa, 2012: 75).

Da Costa agreed to set up a task team to examine the work they were doing. He told them he was unable to give them R12,500, but that there was indeed an unspecified allowance, or specific amount he could give to RDOs at Karee, given that, unlike at Eastern and Western, they did not have assistants. This appeared to the workers to be a delay tactic and their underlying feeling at the meeting was that Lonmin was not going to give them what they were asking.

They reported back directly to the masses when they finished work at 3 p.m. that day. Mbulelo remembered, “We had a meeting in the hostel. We told them that management doesn’t have money” (Interview Mbulelo, worker, 15 August 2013). The workers were disgruntled. They decided to wait for Da Costa and others at the entrance to the building of their offices. They soon learned that he was not there and instead they found the Human Resources Manager at Karee, Tumelo Nkisi. The workers told him, “We are not going to work tomorrow”. According to Mbulelo, Nkisi pleaded, “Guys please don’t do that... [Rather] come back [at a later stage]” (Mbulelo, 15 August 2013). He convinced the RDOs to leave, and come back in three weeks’ time.

On 23 July, 500 people marched and waited outside Da Costa’s offices. The same five RDOs went inside. Da Costa told them that Exco would not agree to the R12,500 demand, but that they were considering providing an unspecified amount to RDOs. Da Costa described the RDOs at this meeting as being more aggressive than previously. He “could sense the potential for strike action” (Da Costa, 2012: 78). The five RDOs went back outside to provide feedback to the marchers and asked Da Costa to address them. Lonmin security was “anxious” about his doing this, and at first he refused. However, he changed his mind. He indicated to the workers that they had not gone through the correct channels, and that “Lonmin would and could not agree to an increase of R12,500 to their basic salary” (Da Costa, 2012: 78).

He was reportedly asked by a mineworker, “What do we do tomorrow?” and subsequently, “How do we return to work when you have not given us what we want?” (Da Costa, 2012: 78) He responded that they must go back to work, and that a failure to do so would result in the workers undertaking an illegal strike. Eventually security attempted to end the meeting and encouraged the marchers to leave the area. The crowd, however,

continued to ask questions about the allowance, while others asked about the R12,500. Da Costa told them he would have an answer regarding the amount or allowance within a week.

The decision to give the RDOs an R750 allowance was signed by Exco. on 27 July (Da Costa, 2012: 79). Da Costa later met with minority unions at Lonmin, including United Association of South Africa (UASA) and Solidarity, who were “supportive” of the RDO allowance. But they advised him “there was a risk of the RDO allowance upsetting the collective bargaining structure, and having a knock-on effect on other job grades” (Da Costa, 2012: 80). They could not have been more correct. Since AMCU had a significant membership at Karee, Da Costa and Nkisi arranged a meeting with AMCU representatives on 29 July 2012. Da Costa and Nkisi met with Steve, who had become a regional organizer, and four other AMCU representatives. They told the two managers that if Lonmin wanted to give the RDOs an allowance, they should.

The fourth and final meeting of the RDOs with Da Costa took place on 30 July. Da Costa requested Molapo to come alone, but Molapo thought it was wise to bring another person, so he called Mbulelo and the two of them went to the meeting. Da Costa then offered the RDOs at Karee money to compensate for the fact that they did not have assistants. But he also went beyond that, offering R750 for unassisted RDOs, R500 for assisted RDOs, and an additional R250 for assistant RDOs (Da Costa, 2012: 81).

One might have expected that this increase would have kept the RDOs at bay, given that the RDO workers’ committee was largely born out of the fact that at Karee RDOs had no assistants. But the R12,500 demand had become engrained in their minds, and in the minds of those workers waiting for the report back. It seemed that among some workers, it was already R12,500 or nothing. According to Molapo, the two RDOs responded to the offer by saying: “you [da Costa] can give us your R750 but what we are saying is that we need R12,500” (interview, Molapo). Another leader who had participated in the early negotiations with Da Costa, recalled their report-back about the meeting: “If he [Da Costa] paid the Karee miners R12,500, Wonderkop [Western] would want R16,000 and Eastern R21,000 - it will [therefore] confuse the company. [He said] ‘I have R750. The R 12,000 [short for R12,500] is for Lonmin’. So we left Da Costa” (worker, Mandla, 9 August 2013).

They thus concluded Da Costa had said that, while the R750 could be given to Karee, the R12,500 that they were requesting could not be determined by Karee only, but was a matter for all of Lonmin to consider. Management’s attempt to quell the workers with an offer of R750 per month backfired. The relatively speedy unilateral decision indicated to workers that management had money sitting in their coffers. The isolation of RDOs at Karee would soon be broken and this would have major ramifications for the development of the strike. At the report back to the RDOs at Karee it was concluded that RDOs from Eastern and Western should join them in a collective struggle for R12,500.

### **Workers’ “Spiritual Resolve” for R12,500**

On 9 August at Wonderkop Stadium, there was a mass meeting of about 3000 RDOs, representing not only Karee, but all of the Lonmin shafts. A decision was taken to march to management the following day. When they did so, they were met by a security officer who told them to wait. After a few hours, they were informed that they needed to go to the NUM—their official union—as Lonmin claimed that it was not in a position to negotiate directly with informal worker leaders. The next day, 11 August, was a turning point in the struggle. Workers were attacked by armed members of the NUM, who apparently opposed the idea of the demand for R12,500, and they responded by heading to a mountain in the community where they could see intruders. They formed a new organization, which they referred to as the “mountain committee”. This committee was more militant and geared towards defending workers from the NUM. Workers armed themselves with dangerous



traditional weapons, such as spears and machetes, and the negotiation table was effectively placed at the foot of the mountain. Workers waited there for their employer until, upon attempting to leave, 34 mineworkers were slaughtered by the police on 16 August. The struggle then took on a spiritual dimension. Within hours of the massacre, mineworkers decided to continue the strike and a new, multi-pronged workers' committee was constituted.

On 11 August, the workers marched to the NUM offices with the hope that their demands would be heard. According to one worker, "We got there [NUM offices], the leadership of NUM came out and shot at us, they beat us and they killed one guy and the other one went to hospital. We ran [away] as workers" (interview, Bongani, exact date unknown, 2012). The workers were unarmed. When they arrived back at the stadium, it was locked. The workers armed themselves and went to the mountain, so that they could see potential attackers, in particular members of the NUM. Crucially, this is when the workers began carrying weapons like spears and machetes in self-defense. The NUM had attacked them once at their offices, and the workers believed they would do so again. What began as a peaceful affair now became bloody and warlike. The demand for R12,500 was quickly becoming a matter of life and death. It is here that violence and intimidation began to co-exist alongside non-violent attempts to prevent people from going to work. It is also during this period that inter-union rivalry resulted, not directly from AMCU, but from the emergence of independent committees and the response of the NUM and some of its members (who had shot at workers on 11 August and opposed the unprotected strike).

Mgcineni "Mambush" Noki, who later became known as "the man in the green blanket," was amongst the physically strongest elected to help lead on the mountain. His loud voice made him suitable to communicate back and forth between the police and workers—and later to the thousands of workers who were on the mountain. He replaced leaders such as Molapo, who had initially approached management and conceptualized the demand for R12,500 (coincidentally, Mbulelo was on leave during this time). Mambush then became the workers' spokesperson. A keen soccer player who had helped organize games in Marikana, he obtained his nickname from a Sundown's soccer player named "Mambush Mudau". His colleagues described him as a "born leader," and his family in the rural Eastern Cape Village of Mqanduli recalls that he always resolved conflicts when they arose in the household, and he feared unnecessary violence and destruction. On the following two days, Mambush was amongst the workers who initiated a further plan to extend the reach of their strike.

Although there had been earlier informal committees (such as the one described in the earlier section), those committees were also *ad hoc*. It also seems that many of the workers joined the strike without knowing the initial leadership. Sandile, a worker from the Eastern shafts section of Lonmin Platinum mine concluded, "We had no special committee that time [prior to 11 August]. Anyone that can talk and listen [had been part of the earlier committee]... Then after NUM [showed that it did] not care about the workers... [we elected] a special committee. [We decided] you and you are the leader today on this mountain... we must make [a] plan to promote" (worker, Thomas, 18 August 2013).

Thomas was one person elected to what he called the "mountain committee". Though Chinguno (2013: 641) is clearly correct that there were certain committees intended to intimate and use violence if and when they deemed necessary, this committee sought, according to Thomas, "to avoid violence... If I am going to Rolland [Eastern] shaft, I don't want anyone to break the motor car or... [to hurt] someone... If I go to Wonderkop [Western], just go smartly" (worker, Thomas, 18 August 2013).

The workers initiated a plan to extend the reach of their strike. It was at this stage that mineworkers from all the other occupations underground (besides RDOs) joined. Intimidation was present as well. One worker indicated, "We talked about the people who

were still going to work and we said that they [those not striking] also wanted that money and maybe if we all did not go underground then the employer will hear us fast enough... the employer will respond to us quickly. And we really did stop people from going to work” (worker, Babalo, exact date unknown, 2012). One strategy involved engaging the bus drivers that take people to their shafts. The same worker recalled, “We told the bus drivers that they should also go and park the buses at the depot because no bus was going to come back and take people anywhere” (worker, Babalo, exact date unknown, 2012).

Workers were carrying weapons and their demeanor had been transformed. The workers marched again to the NUM offices on 12 August, but they did not make it all the way there. Security forces shot at the workers and bloodshed ensued. According to Alexander et al. (2013: 32), “Two security men were dragged from their cars with *pangas* and spears. Their cars were later set ablaze”. On the following day, 13 August, workers proceeded to Karee mine to convince other workers to stop working. They were part of an armed battalion of about 100. One of the workers’ committee members summarized:

We cannot give them our weapons because we have been beaten by the union, NUM. And it will become difficult if we do not have our weapons... The police wanted [to take] our weapons by force and told us that the law does not allow us to go back to the mountain where we are staying. They [police] wanted to go there and we told them that we are not fighting with anyone, and we have the weapons that we have, but we want to go back to the mountain, and we want the employer [to come to the negotiating table] (Tebogo, worker, exact date unknown, 2012).

Workers were attacked by the police. This led to two police officers, two security officers and four workers being killed in a war-like episode. Some of the worker leaders were later charged with the murders of police officers and, to some extent, the deaths of these police officers were used to vindicate the use of excessive force on 16 August.

In the first instance, workers had sought refuge at the mountain, which would be a vantage point from which they could see anyone coming to attack them. In the second instance, they had drawn a battle line and placed the wage negotiating table at the foot of the mountain—refusing to enter the mines’ offices—demanding that the employer come directly to them. It was the employer, Lonmin, rather than the workers, who refused to negotiate. The workers consistently sought to negotiate through their time on the mountain. Though management had initially engaged with the workers prior to the strike, they now consistently refused.

On August 14 and 15, the police and union leaders attempted to negotiate with the workers, but the workers insisted they wanted to speak to the employer only. On 16 August the Marikana massacre took place. As the massacre unfolded, the police targeted worker leaders, hunting them down in a helicopter, with police vehicles and with live direct ammunition. Mambush, for example, was found dead with fourteen bullet holes in his body. Yet rather than end their struggle, workers intensified the strike, thereby remaining heroically steadfast in their commitment to obtain R12,500.

Many workers did not sleep on the night of the 16<sup>th</sup>, nor did they run away from their perpetrators in fear or in outright shock. It was mere hours, not days, after the massacre that they began to consolidate their power. Despite being victims of police repression, the Lonmin workers stood up, organized, and made themselves into a stronger force. Almost immediately after the massacre, on the evening of the 16<sup>th</sup>, they continued to develop a committee based on direct democracy and working class unity. Over the following two days they extended their reach and intensified the strike.

At around 7 p.m. on the evening of the massacre, about twenty workers held an *ad hoc* emergency meeting in the dark area below the mountain, where the bodies of their slain colleagues still remained. The police were still lurking around the dead bodies. To a certain extent the workers were afraid, but they also “wanted to know what [the police’s] intentions were and whether they will kill us also since they had killed our fellow brothers” (worker, Cebisile, exact date unknown, 2013). The meeting was not chaired by anyone and it was not called by a central committee or individual. Workers had come back to the mountain to find out what had happened and to discuss the way forward. Cebisile was at this meeting and he explained that they “decided to meet at the bottom of the mountain and [we] took a decision that we were not going back [to work] until we got what we were asking for [R12,500]. We decided to come back tomorrow morning [the 17<sup>th</sup> August] so that we could find out for sure who was arrested, killed and in hospital” (worker, Cebisile, exact date unknown, 2013).

The workers came to a consensus about two key issues: that the strike must go on, and that workers would stop carrying their weapons. They were adamant that, “we [workers] were not going to be intimidated by the death of our fellow brothers. We were going back [to continue the strike] in memory of those who died” (worker, Cebisile, exact date unknown). Most of the workers went back to their homes, but Cebisile and others stayed there the whole night to observe the police.

At 7 a.m. the following day (the 17<sup>th</sup>), thousands of workers met below the mountain “to nominate a group of people who will go and check the names of all the people who were killed, arrested. Some went to hospital to check the names of those people who were in hospital.” Prior to the 17<sup>th</sup>, the committee had served as the interface between the mass of workers and visitors to the mountain, such as police or management. Thereafter, their roles changed slightly. Cebisile explains, “We heard rumours that the police were targeting those of us who were elected into the first committee, so we decided to elect new people into the committee. People who [the police] would not recognize. So that these people would be able to go to hospital and say they are friends and family members looking for their brothers or relatives instead of saying they are workers” (worker, Cebisile, exact date unknown, 2013).

Furthermore, he recalls that Lonmin wanted to speak to the leaders in the strike committee, and the committee decided to choose different people, “because we were afraid that they will arrest us if we were to go ourselves. We chose new people who will go and talk with them but then they will come back and report to us and then we would be the ones to report to the workers” (worker, Cebisile, exact date unknown, 2013). On the one hand, there was a committee involved in negotiations, while on the other, there was a separate committee which was going to the hospital and organizing funerals. The workers continued to meet below the mountain to engage directly with striking mineworkers during mass meetings, and also to send their small delegation back and forth to go and speak with Lonmin.

A task team was delegated to deal with journalists and other groups of people who arrived to meet with the workers. Critically, a sub-committee arranged funerals in far-off Lesotho and the Eastern Cape, where most of the deceased mineworkers originated. Molefi was part of this organizing committee. He offered an account of what this aspect of the committee involved from mid to late August 2012:

. . . we said everyone who had a loved one dead, they should come and register in the committee here in the mountain. And then people would come and say, ‘I am here to register so and so and he is from a certain place’. So they registered . . . and so we decided on which dates they would have their funerals. And the dates that were many [funerals which took place] was the 1<sup>st</sup> [of September] . . . we [the committee] meet with the municipality in the

area[s]. And then we told them that what we wanted from them was transport going to the funeral . . . so the municipality in the area organized some buses for us so that we were able to go to our siblings and our brothers (Molefi, worker, exact date unknown, 2012).

On 31 August, the Friday before the weekend when the most funerals were to take place, Molefi recalled “we woke up around one at night because we wanted to wait for the bodies of our brothers [who were killed] here in the mountain, those who have left us [for another world], so [that] we could talk to them”. “We took their boxes out of the funeral car and then spoke to them”. As part of this remarkable *ad hoc* ceremony, they told the souls of their slain colleagues, “What we wanted, we have not received . . . we ask you to go in peace”. The spiritual dimension of the demand for a living wage became abundantly clear when, according to Molefi, they pledged to the dead that, “we are not going to turn on what you died for, on what we wanted . . . men, we are not going to turn. We are going forward” (worker, Molefi, exact date unknown, 2013).

Weeks later, on 18 September 2012, following a weekend raid by the police and the South African Defense Force (SADF), workers accepted a 22 per cent increase. This was far less than the increase to R12,500 that the workers had demanded, but was nevertheless viewed by many workers as a major victory. They returned to work. The competing union, AMCU, which had a firm membership in Karee mine prior to the massacre, grew at an exponential rate in the remaining part of 2012 and throughout 2013. This was in part because AMCU President Joseph Mathunjwa had come to the mountain sympathetically to listen to the workers as an equal, whereas NUM President Senzeni Zokwana seemed to side with the Lonmin management, opposing the workers and their decision to go and stay on strike. On 13 August 2013, Lonmin signed a recognition agreement with AMCU, granting the union majority status at the mine.

The leaders of the worker committees, which had changed during the various stages of the worker struggle, were incorporated into the union (although not all of them were incorporated into leadership positions). This raises questions regarding the extent to which the militant politics of the committee remained, or was side-swiped, by AMCU (see Sinwell 2015). While clearly it is necessary to undertake further research on this question, it will suffice here to say that AMCU, and its president, took forward the workers’ demand of R12,500, uniting the three largest platinum mines in the world which had each witnessed unprecedented unprotected strikes in 2012 (Sinwell 2016). It was the combination of the continued workers’ resolve (which was forged independently from unions) and AMCU’s organization that fueled the five-month strike in 2014.

## Conclusion

Without adequate consideration of the forms of worker organization which led up to the Marikana massacre, our analysis of workers’ mobilization is incomplete. Providing further nuance to existing debates surrounding Marikana and the 2012 unprotected strike at Lonmin, this article discussed the initial organizers (these were both NUM and AMCU members) who conceptualized the demand of R12,500 and approached management on 21 June 2012; the committee of RDOs which represented the shafts at the beginning of the strike on 9 August; the “Mountain Committee” that emerged following the attacks by NUM; and then the multi-pronged committee which was transformed following the Marikana Massacre, as well as workers’ decision to join AMCU. The fact that there is ongoing contestation between unions at the platinum mines and elsewhere should not blind us to the seemingly ordinary mineworkers who, drawing from their own experiences and critical consciousness, applied a series of creative and non-violent methods in order to unite the workplace. Finally,

the dominant narrative which depicts mineworkers as violent is not only inaccurate, but it is also dangerous politically, as it potentially undermines the fact that the most comprehensive and directed form of violence inflicted in Marikana was undertaken by the state when the police killed 34 mineworkers on 16 August 2012.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>ii</sup> For an insightful historical account of the centrality of Rock Drill Operators (RDOs) in the platinum mines and the role that they played prior to and in the events leading up to the 2012 platinum belt strike wave, see Stewart (2013 and 2014).

<sup>iii</sup> Though Chinguno (2013 and 2013a) has clearly done exceptional and extensive empirical work, he focuses primarily on Impala, rather than Lonmin. He also points to the idea and practice of violence as his main unit of analysis as opposed to worker mobilization more generally.

<sup>iv</sup> Referring specifically to the 2012 workers' mobilization at Lonmin, Chinguno has asserted that, "The initial committee of RDOs which emerged was militant and posed uncompromising demands" (2013a: 23). The evidence presented in this article demonstrates that this statement was not quite accurate.

<sup>v</sup> This point is drawn from Stewart (2013). Based on his own thorough and unique observations of drillers with and without assistants Stewart (2013) indicated that, "A key job of the rock driller's assistant was to hold the drill bit against the face to start drilling a shot hole. I have seen the drill bit slide and slip when there is no assistant to help. I remain personally convinced that the accuracy of drilling is strongly related to the assistant's role . . . working alone is a qualitatively different experience to having company and may well be a contributing factor to the collective anger expressed by rock drillers on the platinum mines where the issue of one-handed drilling (again) arose during current strikes" (2013: 60). As Molapo suggests, Stewart was right.